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MY LITTLE BOY BLUE

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Mabel

With Mrs. Cochrane's love

March 20th 1901

My Little Boy Blue

By

Rosa Nouchette Carey

Author of "Our Bessie," "Not Like Other Girls," "Little Miss Muffet," etc.

Fleming H. Revell Company

New-York *Chicago* *Toronto*

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MY LITTLE BOY BLUE

"THE SCARAMOUCH"

I AM a middle-aged woman now, and it seems a lifetime ago since we lived in the bow-windowed corner house at Ringford. Sometimes when Ninian comes to see me, and we are sitting together cozily by the fire, waiting for Claude to come in from his rounds—for he has a large West End practice, and his tiresome patients will send for him in the evening—we often talk of old days, and especially of that windy March morning when we first saw "little Boy Blue."

That was Claude's name for him, but Ninian and I called him the Blue Boy, or the Scaramouch. In fact, there was no end to the names Ninian invented for him; he called him by turns the Mountebank, Punchinello, Snip-snap-snorum, Beggar-my-neighbor, and the Mad Hatter; in fact, his nomenclature was as broad as Ninian's wit.

"Go it, little 'un," Claude would say, jeeringly; "as long as you do not call him Beelzebub I don't mind."

But Ninian gazed at him sadly. "What a splendid name!" he said, regretfully. "You've bowled me out, Claude—but then Aunt Pen might object to 'Beelzebub.'"

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Claude meant to be a doctor like father, but he had not gone up to London yet; he was still in the low white house with his uncle, Captain Russell; but he spent most of his time with us. The society of a gouty, irascible old man was not particularly attractive to a high-spirited youth, and Claude always firmly maintained that his real home was with us.

Aunt Pen was very good to him, but sometimes she would put on her severe face and say, "Now, Claude, both you and Maud have been over your music long enough. Music is all very well, and you play very nicely, both of you, but it is not the whole duty of man, or woman either; so, Maud, get your darning, and let Claude go home; the Captain has had a dull day of it." And though I grumbled and Claude frowned, we never disobeyed her. Fancy disobeying dear Aunt Pen!

I wonder if any family was ever happier than ours. To be sure, the year after dear mother died was very sad; and I never noticed before then that father's hair was growing gray, and that he had those little puckers round his eyes; but after the first few months he kept his trouble to himself. Now and then when I met him on his rounds, driving himself as usual in his old gig, I was struck with surprise and pain to see how old and grave he looked; but he always brightened up and looked young again directly he caught sight of me. "Halloa, Maud, do you want a lift?" he would say, pulling up old Whitefoot sharply. "Jump in and I'll give you the reins;" for he knew what a treat this would be to me.

We had one taste in common, father and I—we both

loved music. Father played the violoncello, and I accompanied him; and when Claude brought his violin of an evening we had quite a nice concert. I did so love to see father play; all the lines seemed smoothed out of his face, and he always looked so happy.

Ninian pretended to grumble at these musical evenings; he said he was obliged to stuff his ears with cotton-wool while he learned his lessons; but of course he did not mean it. "Play that thing over again, dad," he would say, "the thing with the runs—rumpty-dumpty tra-la-la;" for Ninian had not a musical ear, and could not have sung "God Save the Queen" correctly to save his life.

But it seems as though I am never coming to little Boy Blue.

Well, on that March morning, father had just started on his rounds, and Aunt Pen was busy in the kitchen —she always made the puddings herself, for we only kept one servant. To-day it was Ninian's choice, jam-roll, with a thick flaky crust; for Aunt Pen often allowed us to choose the puddings, and sometimes father chose too.

I was expecting Claude round presently to practise our new piece, and I was just playing it over, when Ninian, who was lolling in the bow-window, suddenly called to me. There was a delicious low seat that would have held the whole family, which we called our cozy nook, and Ninian was stretched on it with his eyes just above the level of the window-frame.

"Do come here, Maud; there is such a droll little beggar peeping round the corner. He has been there ever so long, listening to the music."

Our house was very old-fashioned—there were few modern houses in Ringford; the front door opened directly on the street, but some iron railings had been put up before the windows to insure privacy, and father had planted a privet-hedge. The boy of whom Ninian was speaking was peeping eagerly between the privet.

"Isn't he a scaramouch?" continued Ninian, derisively. "Why, if Farmer Holbrook put him in his field he would act as a scarecrow;" and then, starting up in great excitement, "Why, Maud, he has got a monkey. I never saw the creature before."

The privet-hedge was rather thin in that part, and I could see the odd pair quite distinctly. The monkey had clambered up the railings, and sat there contentedly eating a dry crust and scratching himself at intervals. He was a very ugly little gray monkey, and I always thought afterward Claude's name of Beelzebub would exactly have suited him; and he had a ridiculous red plaid frock, with a smart little sash tied round his shivering little body.

From the monkey I glanced at the boy. He was a thin-faced, diminutive boy, with a droll, pathetic face, and he was dressed rather oddly in an old blue blouse that hung limply about him. A peaked cap, worn sideways, showed his closely cropped hair, and as I stood there his large dark eyes seemed to look wistfully into mine.

"Ah, Ninian, do you think they are hungry? There is that plum-cake in the cupboard. Aunt Pen would not mind."

"Cut them a big slice," returned Ninian, in a decided voice that at once removed my scruples. But I

did more; I cut a big slice for the boy and a smaller one for the monkey, and then I opened the door. Ninian followed me, shuffling his feet nervously. On these occasions I was always the spokeswoman, being two years older than Ninian, and a stout girl for my age. "There is some plum-cake, little boy," I observed, affably; but as he took off his cap I saw at once that he was older than I thought. He took the cake with a pleasant smile, and the monkey jabbered and grabbed his portion, dropping his crust at my feet.

"Beppo and I are not so very hungry, mademoiselle, but it is good, the *gateau*—I mean the cake." He was a foreigner, then, but he spoke English well. I found out afterward that his mother was French and his father English, and that he had spent the first nine years of his life abroad. They were both dead; they had died of the same fever in London.

"Do you call him Beppo?" asked Ninian, unable to keep silent any longer.

"Monsieur, that is the name Pierrot gave him. Pierrot was a Savoyard who died of that bad fever down our court. Poor little fellow! he was nearly skin and bone with hunger and sadness. We were both alone in the world, Beppo and I—we had to comfort each other. Is it not so, my friend?" But the monkey was too busily engaged picking out the plums and citron with his shriveled little paw to take any notice of his master. Plums and spice were novelties to Beppo. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. When Beppo had finished his cake he would have leisure for sentiment.

"Do you—do you beg?" I was going to say, but I

changed the question to, "Do you live here in Ringford?"

"Certainly, mademoiselle; Beppo and I live at the thatched cottage." And then a gleam came into his eyes—they were beautiful eyes, bright and dark. "I have work at Farmer Holbrook's; I have to keep the sheep and cows from wandering out of the big meadow yonder. I have my dinner and half a crown a week." How proudly he said this!

I began to feel interested. Aunt Pen always told me that I was too fond of asking questions; but if one does not ask, how is one to learn anything?—that is what I want to know.

So I put my elbows on the gate and looked at the boy searchingly.

"Half a crown is not much. You and Beppo must be often hungry."

"We have known hunger, Beppo and I," he returned, simply, "but to me half a crown is riches. I give Madame Burton eighteen pence a week. She is my good friend, Madame Burton, and I sleep with her big boy, Jem, in the little room under the sloping roof. See, mademoiselle, it was she who washed my blouse and gave me the socks I wear;" and he showed me his feet with the gray sock peeping out of the poor broken boot.

Another auditor joined us. Claude had come round the corner a moment before with his violin under his arm. He regarded the group with amazement, then snapped his fingers at the monkey. "What's your name, young shaver?" he asked, carelessly, and the boy pulled off his cap again.

Claude was a big handsome fellow, and we were all very proud of him.

"Monsieur, my name is Gaston Myers. My father was a brave soldier—he is dead; and my mother, she is dead also; and for me there is only Beppo.—Mademoiselle, I ask your pardon if I have done wrong to stand here listening to the music; but I have been here many nights. It sounded so friendly and so heavenly sweet, and I was in no one's way." His eyes rested wistfully on Claude's violin-case. Then he raised his cap and turned away. "*Bonjour*, mademoiselle; thank you for your goodness."

"Rum little beggar," muttered Claude; but I made no answer. I stood looking at the two retreating figures. The boy walked with a light, easy grace that made me think of his French mother; the shabby blue blouse fluttered in the wind. The monkey ran beside him, then it uttered a dismal little cry. The boy stopped and picked it up; one skinny brown arm went round his neck. I watched them until they were out of sight.

I think Aunt Pen was right when she often told me that I was a credulous, impulsive girl. "All your geese are swans, Maud," she said more than once, "and not all their hissing will convince you that they are merely geese;" for Aunt Pen often expressed herself in a most original fashion. She had a rich repertoire of droll sayings, a store of proverbial philosophy that never failed her under any circumstances.

Father used to say sometimes that he did not know which he admired most, Pen's wit or her silence. I never knew silence could be so eloquent. When Aunt

Pen said nothing, and only looked at us with her mild, short-sighted gray eyes, even Ninian felt abashed and had not a word to say for himself.

That night I found it impossible to forget the little Blue Boy; the thin brown face and pathetic dark eyes haunted me. At our evening concert I wondered secretly more than once if a slender figure was peeping between the railings.

The next afternoon Ninian asked me to walk with him to Allerton. I had made up my mind to call on Mrs. Burton—for I knew all the cottagers round us—and to question her about her young lodger; but I could not find it in my heart to disappoint Ninian.

I set off with him rather unwillingly, until I remembered that the road to Allerton would take us past Holbrook Farm and the five-acre meadow; and though I said nothing to Ninian for fear he should laugh at me, I determined to keep a sharp lookout for the Blue Boy. The five-acre meadow had not been fenced in like the other fields, and on one side its only boundary from the common was a deep dry ditch; and it was quite possible for an adventurous heifer to scramble through the gorse. More than once the cattle had strayed, and until he could induce his landlord to put up a fence Farmer Holbrook was compelled to keep a herdboy. Until lately Mrs. Burton's boy Ben had held the post, but had been promoted to the kitchen-garden. We had just passed the row of haystacks when Ninian suddenly exclaimed, "Halloa, there is the Scaramouch;" for in cutting a sapling in the hedge his keen eyes had detected a bit of blue stuff fluttering in the wind.

"Where is he?" I asked, carelessly; but I knew

quite well where he was sitting. I had caught sight of him before Ninian had spoken.

"There, round by that pile of fagots, where the cows are feeding. What on earth is he doing? Let us creep round the woodstack and peep at him. He will not hear our footsteps on the grass." And as my curiosity was also excited, I followed Ninian very willingly.

There was a strawstack near the woodpile, and as we peeped round the corner we saw the Scaramouch sitting comfortably on a little heap of loose straw. He had made a sort of nest for Beppo, for the monkey's head and one hairy paw were just visible.

The odd rasping sounds that had reached our ears were fully explained: little Boy Blue was playing with infinite patience and difficulty on a very primitive instrument—an old broken comb, covered with newspaper; and the melody which I recognized was one of Mendelssohn's "Lieder ohne Wörte," that I had played with father the previous night.

GASTON'S TREASURE

Gaston was so engrossed that he would not have seen us if Ninian had not burst out laughing. I was very angry with Ninian for his unfeeling merriment when I saw the boy's sallow face flush; but he jumped up at once and took off his old cap, and stood quite a long time with his closely cropped dark hair uncovered.

"I ask your pardon, mademoiselle," he said, with a pained look. "I would not have made the music if I had known you were there."

"Music!" muttered Ninian, indignantly, but happily the poor lad did not hear him.

"I was trying to recall the melody you played last night; it was so beautiful."

"Then you were listening to us again last night?" I exclaimed. "And it was so cold and wet! How could you recollect it so well?" For really it was wonderful how cleverly he manipulated that old broken comb.

His face brightened when I said that.

"Was it wrong of me, mademoiselle? But it is so noisy at the cottage, and I like better to be out alone with Beppo. Where there is music I forget the cold and the rain."

"You would have plenty of music in church," I observed, quietly. "You must go next Sunday, Gaston; the organ is so fine."

"But what should I do with Beppo, mademoiselle? Listen; I will tell you the whole truth. I was in the porch when they were singing last Sunday evening. I thought how grand it sounded, like big waves rolling, and it made the tears come to my eyes; and then a great man came out and spoke fiercely to me. 'Be off with you, you and your monkey,' he said. He spoke between his teeth, the savage, and nearly pushed me off the step. The church was not for me, you see, mademoiselle."

"Oh yes, it is," I began, eagerly; but just then Ninian nudged me impatiently, so I knew he was tired of waiting.

I thought Gaston looked after us rather wistfully, and I remembered his sad little speech yesterday: "And

for me there is only Beppo." Poor boy, how lonely he was!

I made up my mind that I would talk to Mrs. Burton. I told Aunt Pen about him when I reached home, and the dear creature was quite interested about him, and when I mentioned the old broken boots she said at once that he could have a pair of Ninian's that had been mended. "And there is that old brown suit that Ninian has outgrown," she continued, for she was very soft-hearted, and I could see the idea of the thin cotton blouse troubled her, "and there are some shirts and socks. If you are sure that he is a good, steady lad, Maud, I could make him up a nice parcel of things; but you had better speak to Mrs. Burton first."

"Never let the grass grow under your feet when there is good to be done," was Aunt Pen's favorite maxim; so I determined to pay a visit to the thatched cottage the next morning.

I found Mrs. Burton, as usual, hanging out clothes in the little side garden, full of black atrophied gooseberry-bushes. No gooseberries ever ripened on them, but lines of wet fluttering garments might be seen at all seasons, and when the lines were bare the children played with the wooden pegs.

A swarm of white-headed, rosy-cheeked children were scampering in and out of the cottage, racing and tumbling over one another, while their mother scolded them in a shrill voice.

Mrs. Burton was a comely, clean-looking woman, who slaved hard from morning to night, with a husband and eight children. She must have had a hard life of

it, and I always noticed that Aunt Pen mentioned her with respect.

She greeted me civilly, but it was rather difficult to keep up a connected conversation while she pegged the wet flapping linen on the line. Directly I mentioned Gaston she said rather crossly that he was indoors with a swollen face and had been awake with pain half the night.

"It is his own fault, as I tell him," she continued, sharply. "He will go out of nights in that thin pinafore, however wet it may be, instead of keeping warm by the fire. My master was giving him a jacketing this morning, till he made him cry. But I don't wonder he was a bit put out—there's our Ben forced to look after the cattle just because Tony has made himself ill."

"Tony?" I remarked, doubtfully.

"That's what we call him, missy; there is no saying his outlandish name. He is half a foreigner, you see, and some of his ways don't suit our notions. Sometimes I wish I had been less tender-hearted, and that he and his monkey were farther. It was all Jem's fault—he is so soft, is Jem—begging me to put him up that bitter-cold night." And she drove in another peg rather viciously.

"O Mrs. Burton, surely you like the poor boy," I began, sorrowfully; but she interrupted me in her brisk way.

"Oh, I like him well enough. He is a decent lad, and a handy one too; he helps me more than Jem or Ben, as I am always telling them; he is quiet and does not plague my master; and we are bound to look after the orphan and motherless, as I said to the doctor this morning."

"Oh, has father been here?" I asked, joyfully, for I knew if father had been at the cottage poor Gaston would soon be well.

"To be sure he has, missy. He met my master in the lane and they had a bit of a talk together, and a minute later the doctor popped his head into the kitchen. I was at my washing-tub, but I could hear all they were saying. He is going to send him some lotion, and I heard him telling him he must keep warm and not stir out for the rest of the day."

I told Mrs. Burton about Aunt Pen's parcel of clothes, and she looked excessively pleased. "Well now, missy," she returned, "I am downright glad that Tony should have the things, for it goes to my heart to see him shivering in that pinafore. Ben shall fetch them when he comes in from the field. You will find Tony in the kitchen." And I was thankful to be dismissed, for my teeth were beginning to chatter with the general dampness.

The white-headed children made way for me as I went down the two steep steps that led to the kitchen. Gaston was sitting in the master's big rocking-chair, with Beppo in his gaudy plaid frock squatting at his feet. The poor boy looked a miserable object with his face tied up with a strip of gray flannel, and I could see that he had been crying; but he uttered an exclamation of pleasure when he saw me.

"Mademoiselle, is it possible?" And he wanted me to take the rocking-chair; but I shook my head and drew up a little three-legged stool, and then he began at once to tell me about father's visit.

"Wasn't it good of monsieur? And he is a physi-

cian, and has promised to cure my face. Ah, what I suffered last night! I tossed and tossed, and listened to Jem's snores. There is only one thing that troubles me—that monsieur forbids my going out at night."

"Do you mind that so much, Gaston?"

"Mademoiselle, it makes me ready to weep. How am I to hear the music? The evenings will be so sorrowful. Last night it was heavenly. The jalousies had not been closed, and I could see everything plainly. You were at the piano, mademoiselle, and the young monsieur was behind you with the fiddle. I kept Beppo warm in my blouse, and I stood there until you ceased playing. The rain was falling, but I did not feel it; but the night brought the pain. Mademoiselle, there is something I want to show you. Some months ago I bought it from a peddler. I gave him my day's earnings and went to bed hungry; but I would do the same again any day. Will mademoiselle permit me to fetch it?" And as I nodded he ran up the narrow, ladder-like staircase that led to his attic. A moment later he returned, carrying something carefully wrapped up in a red cotton handkerchief. To my surprise, it was a fiddle.

"Behold it, mademoiselle," he said, proudly. "It is my own, my very own, and I love it next to Beppo. If I could only play it! but to me it is dumb. I have no one to teach me how to make it speak—that is my grief, that is why I lie awake in the night and feel unhappy. I have no money that I could give to a professor and say, 'Teach me to play my fiddle;' for Beppo and I must eat. And so the dear, beautiful thing is forever silent."

I shall never forget his expression as he said this. In spite of his grotesque appearance and the gray flannel bandage, there was a pathetic dignity about him. He hugged the fiddle as though it were a sentient, living being, and a sort of famished, despairing look came into his dark eyes.

I said what I could to comfort him, and then I told him about the clothes. He was very grateful, and expressed himself in a touching way; and when I took my leave he thanked me over and over again.

I revolved all sorts of plans as I walked down the lane, and my thoughts so engrossed me that I quite started when I heard Claude's voice beside me.

"Halloa, Maud, what's up?" he asked, rather curiously. "You seem in a regular brown study." And upon that I related the scene in the cottage. Claude was a good listener, and he never once interrupted me, though he gave a quick sort of laugh when I described how the boy hugged his fiddle. I was beginning to hope that he was really taking some interest in my protégé, but to my great disappointment he only waited until I had finished before he commenced telling me about some new tyranny on his uncle's part. I was always Claude's confidant, and took his part so vehemently that father sometimes rebuked me for my one-sidedness; but I could not help wishing that Claude would have forgotten his own grievances and thought more of Gaston's troubles. For once—yes, I must own it—I was rather disappointed in Claude. I knew his faults well, but he had never seemed specially selfish; he was always ready with his sympathy when Ninian and I were in trouble.

Things refused to go smoothly just then; the very next day I caught a violent cold, and as there were feverish symptoms I was condemned to remain in my own room, and for some days Ninian was forbidden to visit me. How I chafed in my solitude! How impatient I was even of Aunt Pen's gentle ministrations! But I never dared to betray my ill temper before father. Father had a way with him that made one ashamed of being anything but good.

One evening when he was sitting with me and we were playing backgammon, I asked him if he had seen Gaston.

"Do you mean Mrs. Burton's little French boy?" he returned, rather absently. "Oh, he is all right again and back at his work. I met him only this afternoon, and but for the monkey I should not have known him. He looks quite gentlemanly in Ninian's old suit. He is a nice little chap, and seems grateful for anything one has done for him." Oh, how glad I was to hear this!

I was thankful when my quarantine was over and I was allowed to come downstairs. Before I left my room I hugged Aunt Pen, and expressed penitence for all my misdoings. She smiled a little sadly as she forgave me.

"A little patience is worth a good deal of penitence, Maud," she said, quietly. "Next time you are ill I wish you would remember that." And of course I promised her that I would.

Father was very pleased to have me downstairs again, and when Claude came in and found me at the piano he looked pleased too; in fact, he quite colored up as he shook hands with me. "This is jolly, Maud,"

he said. "I had no idea you would be down this evening. We will have a rare good time, won't we, doctor?" And though father put on his professional face and said very gravely that I was still an invalid and must not be tired, he quite forgot to send me off to bed early. But then we were playing Chopin's delicious minuet, and I knew by the way father was beating time with his foot how much he was enjoying himself, until Aunt Pen gave us all a gentle scolding and carried me off.

When I questioned Ninian the next day about Gaston, he answered, very carelessly:

"Oh, the Scaramouch! I have not seen him lately; he is not my particular friend, you know." And he looked a trifle bored when I begged him to look him up.

"Farmer Holbrook's herdboy is nothing to me," he said, rather sulkily; and when Ninian was in this mood it was better to leave him alone.

The weather was fine and unusually warm for April, so the next afternoon father told me to wrap up well and he would take me for a drive. He was going to a patient some way out beyond Allerton, and he would be glad of my company.

It was always a pleasure to drive with father, so I ran off to get ready, and we had a delightful drive. Father was so merry and amusing, and told me such droll stories of his college days, that I laughed until I was hoarse.

We were just turning the corner of the common borders on Holbrook Farm when father suddenly pulled up.

"Is that not Farmer Holbrook's famous red heifer, Maud?" he asked, pointing to a clump of gorse-bushes. "It strikes me my young friend Tony is not at his post, or the heifer would not be feeding on the common."

"May I go and look for him?" I asked, eagerly. "Do let me, dad. I should so love to have a run after being cooped up in this gig. I would cut across the five-acre meadow and come out in the lane by the haystacks."

Father looked at me doubtfully.

"Are you sure you are not tired, Maud?"

"Quite sure. I feel as fresh as a lark." And then he let me get down.

"Don't stand talking too long, but just tell him the heifer has strayed," he shouted as he drove away.

ANGELS UNAWARES

I ran across the five-acre meadow with the sweet, fresh April breezes fanning my cheeks deliciously. The feeding cattle raised their heads and gazed at me with their soft eyes, and then resumed their life's work, chewing and assimilating the crisp herbage. But in all the wide field there was no trace of the little herdboy. I had reached the woodpile at last, but no Gaston; and as a last resource I resolved to reconnoiter the big haystack. Yes, there he was, and in his old blue blouse, too; and he was lying with his head on his arm and his peaked cap drawn over his eyes, fast asleep, and Beppo, huddled close to him, was asleep too.

Then the spirit of mischief entered into me, and I chanted loudly:

"Little Boy Blue, come blow me your horn;
The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn.
Where is the boy that looks after the sheep?
Under the haystack, fast asleep!"

Oh, how he started! There was quite a bewildered look on his face as he sprang to his feet.

"Mademoiselle—ah, but I have been dreaming. I thought it was my mother talking with me. '*Ton-ton, chèri*, I have come to speak with thee.' I could see her pale face and the smile in her eyes."

"Why did you go to sleep?" I returned, brusquely. "Do you know the red heifer has strayed and is feeding on the common?"

I had roused him effectually; the next moment he had picked up Beppo and was racing across the meadow as fast as his legs would carry him.

How I wished I could have waited until he and the red heifer were safely back! But father's word was law, and I dared not linger. I resolved to pay another visit to the five-acre meadow on the first opportunity. I was quite strong again and should soon have my usual liberty; but, strange to say, more than a week elapsed before I could carry out my intention. One bright May morning Aunt Pen asked me to carry some new-laid eggs to a poor young woman who was dying of consumption; she lived with her sister at the other end of the village. There was no need for me to hurry back, so when I had emptied my basket and talked a little to the invalid, I trudged off blithely to the five-acre meadow. I was so seldom alone—either Aunt Pen or Claude or Ninian was generally with me; but for once I was free from their affectionate supervision.

As I approached the big haystack I heard distinctly the sound as though some one were playing the fiddle. Yes, I recognized the scales that Claude used to play. What could he be doing there? But to my astonishment, as I drew near, I saw it was Gaston. He was sitting on a heap of straw, with Beppo, as usual, jabbering beside him, and his eyes were shining with joy and excitement as he drew the bow deftly across the strings.

"Gaston," I exclaimed, breathlessly, "who has taught you to play the fiddle?"

Then he laughed merrily as he took off his cap.

"Mademoiselle is surprised, and there is much that I have to tell. This straw is clean and dry. It is a seat for a princess. Will mademoiselle sit down and rest?"

"To be sure I will; but you must sit down too." And then I looked at him reproachfully. "O Gaston, where are your nice clothes?" For he was still in the old blue blouse.

"Mademoiselle, they are in the cottage; they are too good to wear when only the cows and sheep regard me, and they have no eyes for the toilet. The young monsieur, he says to me, 'Gaston, you must wear your best clothes when you sing in church; they are too good for your field-work, and it is not cold now.' Ah, he is sage, monsieur; he has shown me the way out of the difficulty. I am to give Beppo nuts and shut him up in the garret, and he will go to bed and keep himself warm until my return; and to-morrow, yes, to-morrow, I go and sing with the big organ, and you and monsieur will be there also."

"Of whom are you speaking?" I asked, rather be-

wildered by all this. Was it father or Claude or Ninian whom he called monsieur?

"Mademoiselle, it was Monsieur Claude of whom I was speaking. Listen; I must tell you the great secret —it is he who has taught me to play the fiddle."

"Claude!" I could scarcely believe my ears. All these weeks he had never once mentioned Gaston, never betrayed the slightest interest in him. Had he done it to surprise and give me pleasure?

It was evident that my mystification delighted Gaston; he threw back his head and laughed merrily.

"Mademoiselle, it was a great secret. Do you remember the day when I had the bad face and showed you my fiddle? When you were gone I could not help weeping because there was no friend to teach me how to make it speak; and then I looked up and there was Monsieur Claude laughing at me.

"'What's the row, little 'un?' he said. Oh, but he is droll, this monsieur; but he was kind—kind as an angel from heaven—when I told him my grief.

"'Look here, Tony,' he returned, 'crying never helped any one to play the fiddle. I tell you what, little chap, I'll teach you all I know, and we'll keep it a dead secret from Miss Maud. You shall play her a tune one of these days, but you must practise hard first.' Mademoiselle, if Monsieur Claude would ask me to lie down and let him walk over me, it would be too little to prove my gratitude."

I listened to all this with glistening eyes. I felt I loved Claude that moment as I never loved him before. In answer to my questions, Gaston told me that Claude had gone to him for an hour three or four times

a week. The lessons had been given in the little sloping garret—master and pupil seated together on the foot of Jem's bed. "There's no need for me to stand out in the street now listening to the music, now my own fiddle talks to me," pursued Gaston, proudly.

How I longed to see Claude and thank him! And as though in answer to my wish, when I reached home I heard him strumming on the piano in the parlor. He looked up and nodded to me without speaking, for he was intent on finishing his harmony; and I sat down beside him in silence. Claude was no longer a boy; there was a little soft down on his upper lip, and in a few months he would be leaving us for his work in London. How we should miss him, Ninian and I! As these thoughts passed through my mind I saw him regarding me with friendly eyes.

"What's up, Maud? You look as solemn as a judge. Has Aunt Pen been scolding you?"

"No, of course not." And then I suddenly caught at the hand nearest me. "Claude, dear Claude, I do want to thank you for being so good to our little Blue Boy; you have made him so happy, and me too."

"Nonsense! None of your romancing, young woman," he returned, gruffly, for Claude hated to be thanked; and yet I am sure he was pleased too, for though he told me to shut up and let him finish his grand movement, he presently recurred to the subject of his own accord.

"I thought it would be fun to surprise you," he said, placing himself beside me on the window-seat, "so I held my tongue. When you were telling me about the little chap, I knew my want of sympathy made you

cross. You were a little waspish that evening; but I only laughed in my sleeve. It was such nuts to me, you see, to know that Tony had had his first lesson and you knew nothing about it."

"O Claude, how I love you for this!" I began, impulsively. But my frankness did not seem to please Claude, for he grew suddenly very red, as though he were embarrassed; and then father came in and Ninian followed him, and our conversation was at an end.

But later on in the evening, as we were turning over some music together, he asked me if I knew that my friend Tony had a splendid voice.

"No, indeed, Claude," I returned. "But I wish you would not call him Tony. Gaston is ever so much prettier!"

"I prefer Tony," he replied, obstinately. "Well, I give you my word, Maud, that he has an uncommon voice. He is a clever little chap, and it won't be long before he knows as much as I can teach him. He is a sight too good for minding Farmer Holbrook's cattle." This was high praise from Claude.

The next day was Sunday, and I watched eagerly for Gaston; but I almost started when I saw him coming up the aisle. For the moment I thought it was Ninian. The brown suit just fitted him, and with his clean collar and well-brushed hair he looked almost like a gentleman; and I could see Ninian staring at him over his hymn-book as though he were impressed.

Captain Russell was not in church, so Claude beckoned Gaston into his pew. This was very thoughtful of Claude, for of course the poor boy was much embarrassed by the novelty of the service; but Claude showed

him the places in his prayer-book and nudged him when he had to stand or kneel, and he got on very well.

But father and I both stopped singing when suddenly a strangely sweet, flute-like voice floated through our little church; and even our good vicar peered over his spectacles as though to discover the owner of the voice. Gaston was quite unaware of the sensation he was making; he was singing with his whole soul, his head erect, and his eyes full of a solemn gladness. But presently I saw the tears streaming down his face.

"It was the joy that overpowered me," he said afterward—"the warmth, and the beauty, and the long deep waves of sound that seemed to wrap me round—how can I describe it, mademoiselle! I was little and mean and lonely no longer; my heart was big—big; but it could not hold all the love and kindness that surrounded me. Monsieur Claude was not pleased; he said it was wrong to cry in church—that one should say one's prayers and sing one's best and be tranquil. But I am not English, like monsieur, and it seems to me that only the old can be tranquil like that."

I found Claude had really been vexed by what he termed Tony's ridiculous exhibition. "I gave it him well when we got out," he said, bluntly. "He is such an excitable little beggar, as though he were strung on wires; but he has promised to behave better in future. Do you know, Mr. Asquith was so struck with his voice that he asked me to bring him round to the vicarage. I fear we shall turn Tony's head among us."

The next thing I heard was that Gaston was in the choir, and that Mr. Belton, the organist, was delighted

with him; and the very next Sunday he wore his fresh white surplice, and his thin brown face and closely cropped head were in strange contrast to the rosy-cheeked rustics beside him. I could not help watching him; but his behavior was perfect, and he never once turned his head in our direction. The next morning Claude came to us in great excitement to tell us that his Uncle Burnaby was coming down to the White House for a visit. We always called it the White House. And though father was reading the leading article I could see he was listening. Claude's uncle was a rich, eccentric old bachelor living in London, and when Claude went up to work for his examination he was to live in Mr. Burnaby's house. He had a big old-fashioned house in Mecklenburg Square. Mr. Burnaby's craze was music; his library was a perfect museum of musical instruments, and he played the violin as well as an amateur could play it.

"I mean to tell Uncle Burnaby about Tony," were Claude's parting words. "If he takes a fancy to him he will give him a helping hand. He is a brick; he is always helping lame dogs over stiles; and he does not do things by halves, either." And Claude was right. When Mr. Burnaby heard Tony's story he merely grunted and said nothing. But Claude was not discouraged; he put Gaston through his paces, and when the boy sang "The King of Love my Shepherd is," Mr. Burnaby's eyes glistened through his spectacles, and he drew in his lips with a sound as if he were tasting some delicious beverage.

A week later our door-bell rang one evening, and to my astonishment I saw Gaston standing in the

hall in his brown suit, and his hair nicely brushed as though it were Sunday, and he was looking very odd and pale.

"Monsieur Claude said that I might come," he began, tremulously. "He will be round directly, mademoiselle —that was his message; but he said to me, 'It is for you, Tony, to tell Miss Maud the great news.'"

"Come in and tell me, then," I returned, eagerly. "There is no one in the dining-room, and we will go there." And I led the way to the window-seat. Beppo scrambled up beside me at once, but Gaston remained standing. There was a scared, wondering look in his dark eyes as he gazed out at the sunset.

"What has happened, Gaston?" I asked, for he seemed to find it difficult to speak.

"Everything has happened, mademoiselle; the whole world has changed—that is what my mother said when she was dying: '*Ton-ton, mon chèri*, the good God will guard thee, and thou wilt not be forsaken.' She was right, my mother: the good God has brought monsieur here."

"How do you mean, Gaston?"

"Mademoiselle, prepare yourself to hear the wonderful—truly it seems too good to be true. I was in despair when Monsieur Claude told me he was going away in September. How was I to live without him? And now Monsieur Burnaby says I am to go too and study music and sing in a big church."

"But Beppo—what will you do about him?"

"Beppo goes too, mademoiselle; we have arranged all that. At first monsieur seemed disturbed; he objected to Beppo; but I was firm. Beppo is my charge;

he is alone in the world, and I am his only friend—that is what I said. He is as clever as a child, and he obeys me; he will be no trouble. Ah, here comes Monsieur Claude; he will explain what monsieur, his uncle, has decided."

"Has he told you, Maud?" exclaimed Claude, excitedly. "I always knew Uncle Burnaby was a brick, but this beats all." And then he told me of Gaston's wonderful piece of good fortune.

Mr. Burnaby had been deeply impressed with Gaston's voice and wonderful talent. In his opinion the boy had great capabilities and only needed training. He wished him to come up to London and study under his old friend Schutz. Gaston was to live in the house of an old servant, who let lodgings in Museum Street. Pierre Lodi was Italian by birth, and had married an Englishwoman. They were a worthy couple, and looked upon Mr. Burnaby as their benefactor; and as there were no children, the monkey might be tolerated.

"And you like the idea, Gaston?" I asked, a little sorrowfully; for, though it was grand news, I should be loath to lose him.

"Mademoiselle, a king could not be happier. I shall play my fiddle all day and sing in the big church, and I shall not have to say good-by to Monsieur Claude, and—and my happiness nearly suffocates me." He put his hand to his throat as he spoke, and his large dark eyes were full of tears. And mine were dim too.

The next day there was no little Boy Blue in the five-acre meadow on Holbrook Farm. Gaston had left Ringford, and for many a long year I did not see him again.

GASTON MAKES HIS DÉBUT

Claude was not a good correspondent, but he wrote now and then, and always mentioned Gaston in his letters; but when he came down at Christmas for a flying visit we heard all there was to tell.

Gaston was working well, and was perfectly happy. Pierre Lodi and his wife were already attached to him, and his fellow-lodgers, young medical students, took a great deal of notice of him and Beppo.

On Sundays he sang at the Foundling, and always dined in Mecklenburg Square; and Mr. Burnaby invited him to all his musical evenings. In a quiet sort of way he took a great deal of notice of the boy.

"Tony has taken to growing," observed Claude. "He tells me he is fifteen, but he does not look more than twelve." Fifteen! Why, that was my age. I thought Gaston was years younger; but he was so slight and thin that it made him look more childish.

When Claude went back to London I sent Gaston a pretty little pocket-book as a remembrance, and he wrote at once to thank me. He expressed his gratitude for the gift in the most touching terms. "It is my treasure, and I shall never part with it," he wrote. "When I wake in the morning I take it from under my pillow and look at it. It reminds me of your goodness to me, mademoiselle, when you visited me in the big meadow. There are no meadows here, and the birds do not sing as they did in Ringford; but I have my fiddle and Monsieur Claude, and I am happier than a king."

Claude was down for a few days at Easter, and

again at midsummer, but the rest of his holidays were to be spent in cruising with Captain Russell in a friend's yacht among the Scilly Isles; and we heard then that Mr. Burnaby had taken Gaston with him to Vienna and Munich.

"And Beppo?" I inquired; but I was deeply grieved when Claude told me that Beppo was dead. He had drunk some drug he had found in the room of one of the medical students, and Gaston had discovered him lying cold and stiff on his bed; the empty phial was lying beside him. Poor Beppo had fallen a victim to his insatiable curiosity.

"Tony was awfully cut up," went on Claude; "he could not play a bit that night. And then he had a worse trouble, for his voice broke, and there will be no more singing at the Foundling. He was so low and down on his luck that Uncle Burnaby said he must have a change, so he has taken him with him. He's downright soft on Tony, and I should not be a bit surprised if he comes to Mecklenburg Square before the winter." And Claude's supposition proved correct. When Claude came down at Christmas he left Gaston comfortably domiciled at 37 Mecklenburg Square.

Gaston never came down to Ringford to see his old friends. Once I remarked on this to Claude, but he shook his head a little sadly.

"Tony wants to come; he never forgets you, Maud. You know that photo you sent me? Well, I have had it framed, and it stands on my writing-table. One day I found Tony studying it so intently that he never heard me come in; but when I asked him what he thought of it he made me the oddest answer.

"'One does not criticize one's friends. Mademoiselle was my first friend. Shall I ever forget the day when she brought the cake to me and Beppo?' And he positively would not say another word about the photo."

"But you might bring him down with you," I returned, in a grumbling tone. "We should all be so glad to see him."

"Yes, and Tony would be delighted to come. But you know what Uncle Robert is. When I hint at bringing Tony he says he can't be bothered with boys —he never invites one of my friends." And as this was a long-standing grievance with Claude, I could say no more.

It was three years after this conversation when I saw Boy Blue again. Claude did not bring him—he was too busy with his hospital work to take a holiday just then. He came down of his own accord.

It is the unexpected that always happens; and so one summer evening the bell rang, and Gaston stood before me; and it was only his smile that recalled my little Blue Boy. And this was he, this slim, handsome youth, with the dark, clever eyes and clear, brown complexion. At his first word, "Mademoiselle," I held out my hand.

"At last you have come to see us, Gaston!"

"Was it my fault that I have stayed away?" he returned, reproachfully. "Do you think I have forgotten my first friend? Never, never! It is not my nature to forget; you know that well."

"No, of course not. But where are you staying, Gaston?" And then he told me that he had put up at the inn.

"I thought I had earned my holiday; I have worked so hard, so hard. Do you know I have played at my first concert? Did you read of it in the papers?"

"Yes, and I congratulate you with all my heart. You have made a splendid début, Gaston." For, indeed, all London was ringing with the fame of the young violinist, who was Herr Schutz's favorite pupil. Claude had sent us the critiques. "I was in an awful funk," he wrote, "when Tony came on the platform looking as white as chalk. But before ten minutes were over I knew he would make his mark—you should have heard the bravos. Uncle Burnaby was in the seventh heaven; he was clucking like an old hen all the time."

"And you never sing now?"

"Never, except in church, mademoiselle. My voice is worth nothing; but what does it matter? I have my violin. Did Claude tell you of Mr. Burnaby's magnificent gift—his own Stradivarius? But then what has he not given me!"

"Claude tells us that you are like a son to him, Gaston." And, indeed, from Claude's account, the friendship between the old man and his protégé was very touching. Mr. Burnaby could hardly have him out of his sight. When he played at concerts—and the old man was always seated close to the platform—his boy's success, his popularity, his virtues, were themes perpetually on his lips; and Gaston repaid his devotion richly.

"He is like a father to me; he gratifies every wish, he leaves me nothing to desire." How often he would say this!

After this first visit we saw Gaston frequently. When-

ever he had a day or two's leisure he would run down to Ringford and put up at the "Plow."

When Claude came down for his summer holiday he found Gaston playing his violin to my accompaniment, and father and aunt were listening entranced.

Claude did not seem quite like himself that evening; he looked pale and harassed. But when father told him that he was working too hard, he answered a little shortly; and more than once I saw Gaston look at him as though he were puzzled.

Somehow that evening was disappointing. I had been counting the days until Claude came, and then he seemed different. He hardly asked after Ninian, who had joined a reading-party in North Wales; and when he took his leave he never asked me to let him out, though I did it of my own accord. Gaston looked after us a little wistfully.

"What is the matter, Claude?" I asked, timidly. I was not quite at my ease with him that night. "We have not seen you for so long, and you have so little to tell us. Has anything vexed you?"

"What should vex me?" he returned, impatiently. "Pray don't take fancies in your head about me, Maud. I suppose Dr. Oliver is right, and I have worked too hard. By the by"—trying to speak carelessly—"Tony seems very much at home here; he is always running down to Ringford."

"Yes, and we love to have him," I returned, eagerly. "O Claude, what a splendid fellow he is growing! No, he is not tall, I know that; but he is so handsome and uncommon-looking; and yet it is the old Gaston, too!"

"I am glad you are pleased with him," replied Claude, shortly. And then he turned on his heel without bidding me good-by. I had never known him so brusque before, and I went back to Gaston a little sadly. He was playing the piano very softly, but more than once I saw him watching my face.

As the days went on the cloud on Claude's face deepened. He was irritable and unlike himself, but he would not allow that there was anything the matter with him. Once he lost his temper with Gaston, and spoke to him so sharply that Aunt Pen gently reproved him; but Gaston only flushed and bit his lip. But a few minutes afterward he came up to me and wished me good-night.

"Surely you are not going, Gaston?" I remonstrated. "It is quite early yet, and we have not tried that sonata."

"I have letters to write," he returned, casting down his eyes.

"You had better come back, Tony," called out Claude, in a hard, imperative voice. "Maud's evening will be spoiled if you go. Don't go off in a tantrum, lad; sit down and play your sonata." I stood aghast. There was positively a sneer on Claude's face, and he was looking so strange and pale. Was it possible that Claude, generous-hearted Claude, could be envying Gaston's genius?

"I am in no mood for sonatas to-night," returned Gaston, gravely, but there was such a pained look in his eyes. "Good-night, Miss Oliver. Good-night, mademoiselle." And he was out of the room before I could stop him.

"O Claude, why were you so cross to the poor boy? You have driven him away." But my vexed inquiry could not exorcise the demon in Claude's breast.

"Tony wants taking down a peg," he returned, roughly. "He is growing conceited. You and Aunt Pen are always blarneying him. Why does he call you mademoiselle? It is a bit of affectation." But I would not hear more. I shut up the music-book and went off to father in the study, and left Claude to grumble to Aunt Pen; but that night I cried myself to sleep. Claude was changed, he had ceased to care for me, and my little world had suffered eclipse.

The next morning, as I was gathering rose-leaves in the garden, I saw Gaston unlatch the green gate. As he came up to me I thought he looked unusually pale, and there were dark rings round his eyes, as though he had not slept.

"Mademoiselle," he said, abruptly, "I have come to wish you good-by. I am going back to London."

"Not to-day, Gaston, surely. It is only Thursday, and you are not due until Saturday. Has anything happened? Is Mr. Burnaby ill?"

"No, mademoiselle, but he will be glad to have me back. And this air is not good for me; it disturbs my sleep, and my nerves suffer. In London I shall rest better, and think of my friends more happily."

"Gaston!" I exclaimed, laying my hand on his arm, "you are keeping back something; you are going because Claude has not treated you well." But he would not let me finish my sentence. He took my hands and held them gently against his breast, and I could feel the quick beating of his heart.

"Mademoiselle, what was it that I once said to you when I was a ragged, miserable boy? 'If Monsieur Claude would ask me to lie down and let him walk over me, it would be too little to prove my gratitude.' He is my friend, my benefactor, my more than brother, and I will never stand in his way, never."

"But, Gaston—"

"Mademoiselle, I have said it. It is better to suffer than to be unkind to one's friend, to be misunderstood than to do wrong." And before I could prevent him he kissed first one hand and then the other, and the next moment he was gone. Ah, I understood then. I sat down on the garden-seat and shivered in the sunshine, and the rose-leaves lay like a carpet at my feet.

That evening Claude spoke to me. He had come in looking very subdued and very much ashamed of himself, and when he heard Gaston had left Ringford he colored, and an uneasy look came to his face.

"He might have come to the White House to wish me good-by," he grumbled; "but I shall see him on Saturday, so it does not matter."

It was an hour or two after this, when Aunt Pen had left the room, that Claude asked me suddenly why I had been crying; but before I could answer he went on, angrily: "How silly I am!—as though I need to ask. Of course you are dull without Tony. Tony is number one in this house. Maud, it would have been kinder to me if you had let me know earlier that your heart belonged to him. All these years"—here his voice broke a little—"all these years I have cared for you, dear; but Dr. Oliver would not let me tell you so. 'She is too young, and you must not spoil your

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work with love-making'—that is what he told me. I was obliged to hold my tongue, but it was bitterly hard. Even when you were a little girl I used to say to myself, 'When Maud is grown up I will ask her to be my wife.'"

Then I did a strange thing. In the moonlight I crept up to him until my cheek rested against his shoulder.

"I am grown up now, Claude, but you have not asked me." And those few words settled the matter.

* * * * *

I had been Claude's wife for five happy years, when one morning my husband came to me with an open letter in his hand. He looked positively radiant.

"I have good news, Maud; guess who is going to be married." But I had no need to glance at the handwriting; the light in Claude's eyes told me that the letter was from Gaston.

"At last I will make you happy, my friend," he wrote, "and there will be no more need for you to lecture me, and tell me that I am an old bachelor. I have thrown the glove at last, and my dear lady has consented to pick it up. In a word, I love, and my affection is returned; and to complete my happiness, Mr. Burnaby approves, and tells me that I have done well.

"The name of my beloved is Marcia—Marcia Beverley—and she is tall and fair, with eyes gray as a dove's wing. Shall I tell you a secret?—it is one for your wife's ear—Marcia reminds me of a certain mademoiselle who used to be good to me. Oh, those old days, how I loved them! And yet there were painful

hours, too. Ask your wife, Claude, if she remembers how I came to her one day when she was gathering rose-leaves in the garden. How those gray eyes questioned me! But, my friend, though it nearly broke my heart to say good-by, I was true to you and to her, and now I have my reward.

"Dear friends, you must love Marcia, and welcome her for my sake. She is a great lady, but out of her condescension and goodness she has stooped to the poor violinist. Hold, I must finish quickly, for my lady's eyes are looking at me reproachfully as I write. 'Who is this mademoiselle,' she asks, 'of whom I remind you?' And I make answer, gravely, 'Mademoiselle is the wife of my friend Claude Russell; and they have called their boy Gaston to do me honor, and it is he who is now little Boy Blue.'"

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